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Research and Analysis Branch

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CHANGES IN THE MILITARY RESISTANCE IN FRANCE, SPRING 1944

In France, Spring 1944

Description

The following report, substantially an airgram of 4 May 1944 from Algiers, describes the organization and attitudes developed recently in the military resistance in France.

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CHANGES IN THE MILITARY RESISTANCE IN FRANCE: SPRING 1944

Summary

Recent information on the organization of the military resistance in France indicates that formations are more closely-knit than they were six months ago. However, the program of arming the Resistance has not yet met French expectations regarding the nature and scale of Anglo-American aid. Resistance believes that a lack of confidence in the military organization in France, unjustified in view of recent improvements, lies behind the American reluctance to deliver arms and the British restrictions on travel and communications from England.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Resistance in France has survived a winter that most of its members confidently believe will be the last that it will have to face. The dissolution of the maquis, which many feared would follow the first deep snows on the mountains, did not take place, and despite the current campaign of repression, most of the military formations have been able to maintain their cadres intact. Two recent arrivals from France have brought to Algiers new information on the military organization of the Resistance and on current attitudes in France toward the Allies.

II. THE PRESENT STATE OF RESISTANCE

A. Military Organization

One of the recent arrivals from France visited the headquarters of the chief military formations in the course of

an official liaison mission from Algiers. The maquis, he declares, was able to survive the winter only by setting up isolated strong-points on the model of regular military cantonments. The réfractaires constructed their barracks themselves, while the peasants of the neighborhood provided food and supplies. In the area of these cantonments, the military chiefs were often able to maintain a sort of independent local authority, sometimes even issuing official documents stamped with the Cross of Lorraine and the words "Quatrième République." On one occasion, this informant held a meeting of regional maquis leaders. Each one arrived semi-publicly, in an automobile, while military units with machine guns guarded all the roads leading to the meeting place.

Such boldness in the face of the enemy is possible, of course, only in areas where a full-scale campaign of repression is not in progress. There the Germans or the Militia employ large forces, individual maquis formations cannot hold out. But even after a center of Resistance appears totally destroyed, local leaders make an effort to resume contact, and to rebuild their cadres once the wave of repression has passed. There is no lack of volunteers for the maquis. The limitation on its size is arms, not manpower. In each important area, large numbers of men are on call, waiting for the military leaders to order them to active duty.

The concept of soldiers on active service is becoming increasingly widespread among the men of the maquis and military procedures are increasingly accepted. Deserters are subject to the strictest military justice. There is now such an excess of recruits that the leaders can afford to make a selection. In some areas, it is only after an intensive course at one of the Resistance training camps, and after proving himself in a trial coup de main, that a volunteer is regularly enrolled. With the expected invasion drawing closer, the Resistance leaders have abandoned a good deal of their previous caution, and now agree with their Communist Allies that constant acts of sabotage, derailments, etc., are necessary to maintain the fighting trim of their men.

Despite this substantial technical progress, the maquis forces are still unevenly distributed and of varying military competence. While all the mountainous areas of the Midi have considerable Resistance forces, some departments of the North are almost totally without military formations -- for example, the Seine-Inférieure. The active Breton Resistance has been severely handicapped since the Germans discovered the chief cache of arms. In general, the Channel coast area is the most difficult for Resistance operations. In the departments of the Nord, and the Pas-de-Calais, however, military formations are apparently strong and well organized. Here, as everywhere, the chief problem is not men but arms.

B. The Resistance and the Allies

After a winter of disappointments, the large-scale arming of the Resistance from the air began about two months ago. Resistance leaders now express themselves as fairly satisfied with the amount of aid they are receiving. But they cannot understand why large deliveries of arms were so long delayed and why they were allowed to reach so low a point during the most difficult months of the winter. They also recognize that the current program is overwhelmingly British rather than American. Finally, their criticisms of Allied bombing attacks on French cities are growing in intensity.

In one respect, at least, liaison between the French Resistance and the Allied Air Forces has improved. The latter have apparently agreed to leave attacks on trains entirely to the Resistance. But the current Air Force program of interrupting transport by hitting railroad marshalling yards appears ineffective and dangerous to most of the Resistance leaders. Only rarely, they say, is a complete stoppage achieved; usually at least one track remains intact or can be almost immediately restored to operation. Even where success is achieved against this particular type of target, the interruption of traffic lasts only a short while. If the raid fails, destruction of dwellings and casualties are usually heavy, since such targets, in contrast to other communications objectives like bridges, are almost invariably located in thickly settled areas.

Here again, criticism has focussed on the Americans rather than the British. The small-scale night attacks on the latter, at low altitudes, appear better calculated to spare French lives than the high-level daylight raids of American four-engined bombers. Extensive civilian casualties in recent Fortress raids on Paris and Rouen (where the Cathedral is reported damaged) have provoked a new wave of criticism. Sober observers agree that the French reaction to our bombing attacks remains the most serious check on pro-Allied enthusiasm.

A recent arrival from Paris assures us, however, that certain extreme forms of criticism reported from France need not be taken too seriously -- specifically, the charge that the Allies are trying to eliminate future competition by destroying France's industrial potential, and the criticism of delayed-action bombs as inhumane weapons. Those who advance the former charge are usually found to be anti-Allied in other respects; they are more or less conscious agents of enemy propaganda. As for delayed-action bombs, they spare the civilian population at least as often as they trap unsuspecting individuals -- since they give the authorities time to evacuate a whole threatened area.

III. CONCLUSION

In sum, the Resistance leaders believe that the current program of arming the maquis does not yet reflect a complete confidence on the part of the Allies in the efficacy of ground attacks on military objectives from within France, as opposed to

large-scale air attacks from England or the Mediterranean. They feel sure that a well-directed team of resolute men could, for example, interrupt at the proper time the whole electricity distributing system of the Paris area. Targets, they believe, are not yet adequately apportioned between the Resistance and the Air Forces.

A certain lack of confidence, the French feel, is also implicit in the current freeze on departures and secret communications from England. For the Special Services, which handle practically all contacts between the Government and the Resistance, these restrictions create insoluble problems. With their headquarters in Algiers and their operating bases in England, the Special Services now find themselves unable to keep up the most essential communications or to plan their future activities. The continuation of such restrictions, they warn, might considerably reduce the tactical effectiveness of the Resistance formations at the time of an Allied landing.

In his press conference of May 1, Emmanual d'Astier, Commissaire for the Interior, expressed his hope that the negotiations now being carried on by General Koenig, military delegate for the National Committee in London, on the subject of aid for the Resistance, would have a favorable outcome. To the Resistance leaders, General Koenig's mission is of paramount importance. Their military formations, they believe, are now trained and organized for action and their great need is for sustained deliveries of arms and a closer operational understanding with the Allied Command.